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ABSTRACT

This study examined effects of exposure to violence on symptoms of psychological trauma and on aggressive behavior in 3rd-8th grade children. Children in 11 public schools in three school districts in Ohio were administered the Life Experiences Survey, a self-report questionnaire designed to measure children's exposure to violence and the psychological impact of such exposure. The questionnaire measures: demographics, recent violence exposure, past violence exposure, recent aggressive/predatory behaviors, trauma symptoms, parental monitoring, and television viewing behaviors. Findings indicated: levels of victimization by violence were high, especially among males; rates of recent witnessing of violence were also high for both boys and girls; almost without exception, boys reported higher rates of aggression toward others than girls did; and over one in five students reported watching over six hours of television per day. Multiple regression analyses of the relationship between violence exposure and total trauma symptoms found that, after controlling for demographic variables, violence exposure variables explained 35 percent of the variance in the total trauma symptom score. Additionally, 45 percent of students' own violent behavior was explained by the following: demographic variables, parental monitoring, television viewing habits, and recent and past violence exposure. (DB)

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Mental Health and Behavioral Sequelae of Children's Exposure to Violence

Introduction

Recent studies have begun to document the extent to which violence pervades the lives of this nation's children. Data indicate that alarming numbers of young people have been victimized, have known victims of violence and have engaged in violent acts. Although researchers have documented these statistics and publicized by the media, few attempts have been made to explore the consequences violence imposes on the emotional well being of children and adolescents. The current study is among the largest yet undertaken investigating these consequences. It examines the effects of exposure to violence on symptoms of psychological trauma and on aggressive behavior in a sample of 3rd-8th grade children. Specifically, the study investigates: (1) the incidence of violence exposure among children across three of the settings they encounter in their daily lives - home, school, and neighborhood, (2) the incidence of students' own self-reported violent behaviors, (3) the effect of exposure to violence on students' reports of depression, anger, anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress, (4) the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive or predatory behaviors, (5) the degree to which parental monitoring is related to violence exposure and aggressive behaviors, and (6) the relationship between TV viewing and aggressive behaviors.

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Method

The study employed a survey design using a 45-minute, anonymous self-report questionnaire administered to students in grades three through eight during the 1995-96 school year. The data collection took place during regular school hours. Students were informed that their participation was completely voluntary.

The sampling pool consisted of students in grades three through eight who were present on the day the survey was administered in eleven public schools in three school districts in Ohio. The schools included three Cleveland City schools (central city), four small city schools in northeast Ohio (small city), and four schools from a rural county in northern Ohio (rural).

Variables and Instrumentation

The Life Experiences Survey used in this study is a 45-minute self-report questionnaire designed to measure children's exposure to violence and the psychological impact of their exposure. This instrument is an adaptation of the questionnaire used in Singer et al.'s previous study (1995) which examined high school students' exposure to violence. It was modified for use with younger children by decreasing the complexity of the response categories and altering the wording to increase comprehension and relevance for younger children.

There are seven areas on the questionnaire: demographics, recent violence exposure, past violence exposure, recent aggressive/predatory behaviors, trauma symptoms, parental monitoring, and television viewing behaviors.

Demographic Variables. Demographic information included age, gender, grade level, race/ethnicity, number of people in the home, and parent composition in the home.

Recent Exposure to Violence. Recent exposure to violence was measured by directly asking children to report violence they had experienced or personally witnessed over the past year. Students were asked not to include events they may have seen or heard about from other people or from other sources such as television. The 26 items contained in this part of the questionnaire were derived from the 24-item Recent Exposure to Violence Scale (Singer, Anglin, Song & Lunghofer, 1995) which examined six types of violence: threats, slapping/hitting/punching, beatings, knife attacks, gun violence, and sexual abuse. Two questions were added that asked children whether they had experienced or witnessed someone having a gun pointed at them.

Past Exposure to Violence. Past exposure to violence was measured through a modified 12-item version of the 10-item Past Violence Exposure Scale which was included in Singer et al.'s study. Children were asked to report specific acts of violence they had experienced or witnessed during their lifetime not including the past year. The same types of violence described above were included.

Recent Aggressive/Predatory Behaviors. Aggressive behaviors were measured by asking students to report how often during the past year they had engaged in each of five violent acts: threatening others, slapping/hitting/punching *before* the other person hit them, slapping/hitting/punching *after* the other person hit them, beating-up someone, and attacking someone with a knife. The six-item Violent/Predatory Behavior Scale study achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .79 in a previous study of high school students (Song, Singer & Anglin, In press).

Trauma Symptoms. Trauma symptoms were measured using the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSC-C: Briere, 1996). The TSC-C is a self-report measure of posttraumatic distress and related psychological symptomatology. It was

written to be understandable to children as young as eight years. The TSC-C consists of 54 items that yield six clinical scales: anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, dissociation, anger, and sexual concerns. Items from the sexual concern scale were not included because of objections from school administrators.

Television Viewing. Three questions were included to measure children's television viewing habits. The first question asked students to select the amount of television viewed daily from six response categories. The second question asked students to select their favorite type of television program from among seven categories. Finally, students were asked about the kind of television programming available in their home.

Parental Monitoring. Parental monitoring was measured using an adaptation of a parental monitoring questionnaire (Flannery, Vazsonyi, Torquati & Fridrich, 1994). Flannery et al. reported their scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .77; our 7-item scale achieved an alpha of .76.

Results

A final sample of 2,245 students was obtained, representing 80% of the students in all schools at the time of the survey. The mean age of participants was 11 years old (SD = 1.8); 51% of the sample was male. The sample was 57% white, 33% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 5% other.

Levels of victimization by violence within the past year were high, especially among males. Across the three sites, 41% to 50% of boys reported being slapped, hit, or punched at school; and 7% to 18% reported being beaten up in their own neighborhoods. Additionally, 12% to 17% reported having had a gun pointed at them, and 6% to 11% reported having been attacked or stabbed with a knife. Rates of female victimization by violence within the last year were also high: 38% to 45% reported being slapped, hit or punched at home, 4% to 10% reported being attacked or stabbed with a knife, and 8% to 15% reported having been sexually abused.

Rates of recent witnessing of violence within the past year were as follows: For boys across sites, from 62% to 78% had seen someone beaten up in school, from 34% to 70% had seen someone beaten up in the neighborhood, and from 13% to 44% had seen someone shot at or shot. For girls across sites, from 8% to 35% had witnessed someone being sexually abused, from 16% to 35% had seen someone being beaten up at home, and from 8% to 38% had seen someone being shot at or shot.

Almost without exception, boys reported higher rates of aggression toward others than girls did. Approximately half of all boys reported having hit someone within the last year *before* being hit. Over 80% of all boys reported having hit someone within the last year *after* being hit. From 43% to 69% of central city, small city, and rural boys reported having beaten up someone within the past year. From 37% to 52% of girls reported having hit someone *before* being hit and from 66% to 76% reported having hit someone *after* being hit within the past year.

Over one in five students reported watching over six hours of television per day. There were clear gender differences in students' favorite type of television program. The largest category selected by boys was "shows that have lots of action and fighting," with 44% of boys selecting this as their favorite type of television show. The second largest category of show for boys was "shows that are funny" (33%). For girls, the largest category of programming was "shows that are funny" (38%), followed by "shows that feature music videos" (29%).

Through use of multiple regression analyses, the relationship between violence exposure and total trauma symptoms (measured by total Trauma Symptom Checklist score) was assessed for students across school sites. The results revealed that,

after controlling for demographic variables, violence exposure variables explained 35% of the variance in the total trauma symptom score.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to explore the degree to which children's own violent behaviors could be explained by the following: demographic variables, parental monitoring, television viewing habits (number of hrs. viewed per day and favoring violent shows), and recent and past violence exposure. The results indicated that 45% of the variance in students' own violent behaviors was explained by the independent variables.

This study demonstrated that violence exposure was strongly related to symptoms of psychological distress in a large, diverse sample of children in grades 3 - 8. Furthermore, a strong relationship was found between children's own violent behaviors and parental monitoring, television viewing habits and exposure to violence.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that children who have been exposed to violence should have access to a responsible adult to talk with for support and assistance. Schools, as a common meeting place for children, should provide such access. Once these initial communications have occurred, determinations could be made to refer children for more intensive services as necessary. For the convenience of violence-exposed children and their families and to maximize the success rate of referrals, these services should either be provided at school or within a short distance of the school.

This study also suggests the importance of parental monitoring to the safety and security of children. Information about the significance of parental monitoring should be communicated to parents through written materials, public presentations and training workshops. It also should be recognized that due to financial, employment and marital circumstances, some parents would find it more difficult to monitor their children. Other important ways of monitoring children should be emphasized such as after school activities, summer recreation and job programs, and programs that support the monitoring of truants.

In concert with other research, this study found that children watch far too much television and that their favorite programs often have violent themes. Parents and others should limit the amount and content of children's television viewing. Television is not an appropriate substitute for more important activities such as reading, doing homework and playing sports.

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